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Obama rally helps police prep for RNC

But while crowd was huge, event is far from a perfect parallel, authorities say

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Sen. Barack Obama's victory rally in downtown St. Paul on Tuesday provided some lessons to police as they plan for the Republican National Convention, but they stopped short of calling it a full-fledged dress rehearsal Wednesday.

"To compare the two events, I don't think is accurate or fair," said St. Paul police spokesman Tom Walsh. "Any time you have a large group of people and a large group of police officers, I think that's a learning experience. Can you regard that as practice for the RNC? I suppose you can."

There were 19,583 people inside the Xcel Energy Center for Obama's speech Tuesday night, St. Paul Fire Marshal Steve Zaccard said Wednesday. Police estimated an additional 15,000 people were outside who were turned away but could watch Obama declaring that he was the Democratic presidential nominee on large television screens.

Hundreds more were next door, at Roy Wilkins Auditorium, for two St. Paul high school graduations.

The crowd was jubilant and police said the group managed itself when lining up over more than 20 blocks. There were reports of a small number of

protesters outside the Xcel, but nowhere near the 50,000 people that protest organizers say will be there in September for the Republican convention.

"It's fundamentally a different group of individuals," said Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher. "The people out Tuesday were a positive, upbeat group, and the people coming to protest will be there to express negative emotions and unhappiness."

Erin Dady, director of planning for the Republican National Convention, said the Obama event was "a dry run on our ability to respond and move resources quickly."

Various city departments had to stay limber, she said, reacting quickly to a growing python of a crowd that twisted throughout downtown Tuesday.

"We had more trash than we anticipated, and we had to put up Porta Potties in Rice Park," she said.

About 25 St. Paul officers were on a traffic detail and 14 officers were inside the Xcel — a small fraction of the number of officers who will be working during the Republican National Convention, Walsh said. Police started planning for the rally when they received word late Friday or Saturday that Obama was coming to town.

Large events like Tuesday's help police determine how many people fit in an area, Walsh said, adding that police are accustomed to handling crowds of that many, if not more.

"I think we have a pretty good handle on it (for the Republican National Convention), but it's always good to see," he said.

Were there other lessons to be learned?

"What kind of response do we need to maintain that

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kind of crowd?" Walsh said. "How many Porta Potties? How many paramedics?"

There were no reports of major injuries Tuesday, but there were some twisted ankles and scraped knees, Walsh said.

Things were mostly calm, though police arrested two men inside the Xcel for disorderly conduct, Walsh said. They were intoxicated and trying to take wristbands from people who had access to a restricted area, he said.

Bloomington police sent 17 officers to the rally to lend St. Paul police assistance, but also to get the lay of the land. More than 60 Bloomington officers will be working during the Republican National Convention, said Bloomington police Cmdr. Kevin Hinrichs.

Hinrichs said Tuesday was a chance "to see the venue and to start to work out some of the kinks and so forth as we work toward the RNC."

Teresa Nelson, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota who is representing the Coalition to March on the RNC and Stop the War, said Tuesday's rally "seemed to be very orderly."

"It kind of makes me wonder why it's taken the police so long in regards to the RNC to figure things out about where demonstrators are going to go, when they can plan this in a very short timeframe and do it fairly well," Nelson said.

Joe Nathan, a Highland Park resident, sent an e-mail message to the St. Paul Issues Forum on Tuesday night after attending the rally.

"Very, very positive night for St. Paul city as a run up to RNC," Nathan wrote. "Protestors urging us to vote for no one were right across street from Xcel —

loud, clear and certainly given opportunity to express their views."

The group across the street numbered 20 to 30, and six or seven people protesting abortion were standing next to the Xcel, Nathan said Wednesday.

In the end, Dady said convention officials Wednesday felt good about how Tuesday went.

"Operations and logistics were a great success and a real confidence booster moving into the Republican convention," she said.

Dave Orrick contributed to this report.

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